

THE READER'S PAGE

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The American Voice

By John B. Larson

Six months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Paine rallied the colonies and provided the intellectual underpinnings for the American Revolution.

Paine's pamphlet, "Common Sense," captured a wide readership and galvanized discussion in town meetings, the workplace, and churches. It gave rise to an American voice, enshrined in the words of Thomas Jefferson. That voice, which would lead to

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the Declaration of Independence, came from a place deeper than resistance to onerous taxes and lack of representation. It resonated with people bent on changing the rule of absolute monarchy over men. It resolved that government proceeded from the consent of the people, and enshrined the rule of law, which alone stands as king.

Author and Harper's Magazine current editor Lewis Lapham, in my view a successor to Paine's tradition of political dissent, laments that the political consciousness that drove the citizens to dissent and speak out then is unwelcome in today's political climate.

In the "Rights of Man," which preceded Common Sense, Paine wrote: "When it shall be said in any country in the world, my poor are happy; neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive...when these things can be said, then may that country boast its constitution and its government."

Paine's words still carry great meaning today.

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Americans need to speak from their hearts and heads, in their own voice, and they need to level with one another about the reality of their lives' circumstances and what that means to their hopes, aspirations, and fears. In turn, they need to listen to their fellow citizens who share a common concern and a common desire for candor and truth.

The world is a complex place. It is shrinking in dramatic fashion. Technology is outpacing traditional society. As much as people would like to defer the untidy work of democracy to someone else, there are

no silver bullets, no charismatic heroes, no simple panaceas to its evolving challenges. Its solutions demand citizens' participation in the time-honored tradition of standing up, speaking out, and communicating to one another the shared concerns for nation, communities, and families.

Thomas Paine was such a citizen. He was not a decorated general or elected official or politician. He was simply a thoughtful man who spoke his mind and helped citizens find their voice.

The great orator and statesman Daniel Webster put it this way, America could rebound from any loss but one.

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Walls, industry, economy – they can all be rebuilt, he said.

"But who shall reconstruct the fabric of demolished government? Who shall rear again the well-proportioned columns of constitutional liberty? Who shall frame together the skillful architecture which unites national sovereignty with states rights, individual security, and public prosperity? No, if these columns fall, they will be raised not again. Like the Coliseum and the Parthenon, they will be destined to a mournful and melancholy immortality. Bitterer tears will flow over them than were ever shed for the monuments of Roman or Grecian art. For they will be the remnants of a more glorious edifice than Greece or Rome ever saw: the edifice of constitutional American liberty."

On this Fourth of July, be proud of our heritage, but know in your heart, to avert the mournful melancholy that befell Greece and Rome, Americans must find their voice!

The writer represents Connecticut's 1st Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives.